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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 CAIRO 002990

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

LONDON FOR ARABIC MEDIA UNIT

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: OPRC PROP OITIP KPAO EG

SUBJECT: BOGUS USG MEMO 'EXPLAINED' BY AL-SHARQ AL-AWSAT

CAIRO BUREAU CHIEF

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REF: CAIRO 2877

¶1. (SBU) Summary: PA officer visited Abdel Latif Al Manawy, Cairo bureau chief of pan-Arab Al Sharq Al Awsat newspaper, to discuss an April 3 article appearing on page 9 of that paper referring to an alleged State Department memo "urging the White House to begin direct talks" with the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) in Egypt. During the meeting, Al Manawy admitted not to have seen the memo and stated he had made two mistakes: 1) not contacting the Embassy for confirmation of the memo's veracity; and 2) reporting that "Western," rather than "Arab," sources had alerted the bureau to the memo. Al Manawy also admitted that he only used a single source for the story -- a "trusted Arab ambassador," who had reported to him the purported memo's contents. PA officer requested that, in the future, Al Manawy's office contact the Embassy for comment on issues relating to USG policies and relations with Egypt. Al Manawy promised to provide the Embassy with a copy of the purported memo and other source materials for the article, but we doubt he will do so. End summary.

¶2. (SBU) PA officer and senior PA LES visited Abdel Latif Al Manawy, Cairo bureau chief of London-based Al Sharq Al Awsat newspaper, on April 18 to discuss an April 3 article that sourced an alleged State Department memo that recommended the White House begin "direct talks" with the MB in Egypt. The article, entitled "Sources: U.S. State Department Calls for the White House to Begin Direct Talks with the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt," reported that "Western diplomatic sources" had discussed the memo's contents with the bureau. The report itself neither quoted from the alleged memo nor provided details about its date or author. The article also reported that Embassy Cairo had begun talks with the MB. No USG officials were quoted or referenced in the article. Mohammad Habib, Deputy Supreme Guide of the MB, was quoted denying that the MB was in dialogue with the USG and stating that any such talks would take place "under the control" of Egypt's MFA.

¶3. (SBU) In the meeting, PA officer told Al Manawy that the Embassy would like to review the memo in question and asked why the Embassy, or the State Department in Washington, was not contacted to confirm the memo's veracity and invited to provide a response. Al Manawy immediately admitted that it was "a mistake" not to have contacted the Embassy. He then admitted another mistake: Rather than referring to "Western" (in Arabic, "western" is "gharbiya"), the article should have read "Arabic" (in Arabic, "arabiya") diplomatic sources. The "mistyping" of the word, Al Manawy claimed, had led readers to misunderstand the article. When PA officer asked about the article's sources, Al Manawy admitted there was only one source: a "trusted Arab ambassador," whom he could not name. The source had briefed Al Manawy on the memo, which Al Manawy said he himself had not seen. PA officer pointed out that the April 3 article had led other Arab media outlets, trusting Al Sharq Al Awsat's reputation, to report the "memo," thereby spreading incorrect information. PA officer requested that Al Manawy's office contact the Embassy about future articles pertaining to the State Department and USG-Egypt relations.

¶4. (SBU) In response, Al Manawy suggested that the real issue was not the memo itself, but rather whether the USG really would open talks with the MB. "Many people are talking about how talks between the U.S. and the Brotherhood are inevitable," he said. Al Manawy stated that, by publishing the article, he was just trying to push forward the discussion on whether USG-MB talks should take place. PA officer declined to follow that line of argument and returned the discussion to the article itself and its questionable sources. The meeting ended with Al Manawy promising to provide the Embassy with a copy of the memo and other information his bureau sourced for the article, by close of business on April 18. (Note: Al Manawy had not emailed or faxed the Embassy any information, nor called, as of close of business on April 19. End note.)

15. (SBU) Comment: Al Manawy is known to be ardently pro-government. It is unlikely that the April 3 article had the USG as its primary target. Instead, the article was very possibly a part of an ongoing smear campaign targeting the MB (reftel). Al Manawy undoubtedly realized that an article appearing in Al Sharq Al Awsat about USG-MB talks would resonate in other Arab media outlets, but especially in Egypt. The article, and rumors circulating among Egyptian journalists that the MB is to receive USG funds, succeeded in putting the MB on the defensive. Attesting to the article's impact on journalists in Cairo, the Embassy's press office has received a dozen calls since April 3 asking about the alleged USG-MB talks. The Embassy has forwarded a copy of the April 3 article to Embassy London's Arabic Media Unit for follow-up with the paper's chief editor. End comment.

GRAY